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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000303

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [OSCE](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: OSCE PROVIDES SNAPSHOT OF SOUTH OSSETIA

REF: A. (A) TBILISI 0219

[1](#)B. (B) TBILISI 0194

[1](#)C. (C) TBILISI 0078

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b)&(d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) OSCE officials shared with us several interesting bits of news and analysis about South Ossetia during a recent visit to Tskhinvali. Head of Mission (HOM) Roy Reeve said Russian officials had told him in Moscow that the South Ossetian decision to declare Georgian Deputy State Minister for Conflict Resolution Ruslan Abashidze "persona non grata" -- in response to Abashidze's visit to the headquarters of the pro-Georgian "alternative government" -- was "foolish." Reeve was confident that the South Ossetians, under pressure from the Russians, would soon lift the ban on Abashidze. OSCE officials suggested that Sanakoyev was making some in-roads in the separatist-controlled parts of South Ossetia, having gained popularity at the expense of the Tskhinvali authorities in a recent dispute over mandarin orange shipments. Reeve also suggested that the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) commander was making more of an effort to be even-handed, largely thanks to the helpful presence of the new Georgian peacekeeping battalion commander. End Summary.

The "De Factos" vs. "The Alternatives"

[1](#)2. (C) Accompanying a USAID visit to Tskhinvali February 8 for meetings with OSCE, de facto authorities, and others (assistance-related information from the visit will be reported septel), Poloff learned from Reeve that Russia was pressing the South Ossetians to lift the travel ban on Abashidze. Reeve said Russian officials had called the ban "foolish" (Duratskii) in meetings during Reeve's visit to Moscow February 3-4. Reeve said the South Ossetians were currently looking for a face-saving way to lift the ban, which he noted had been imposed in a "fit of pique" because Abashidze had visited "alternative government" leader Sanakoyev in Kurta following a meeting with de facto officials in Tskhinvali (ref B). Reeve said that as soon as Abashidze was free to travel, the next meeting of the Steering Committee for the donors' economic rehabilitation projects would be held in Tskhinvali.

[1](#)3. (C) OSCE's Ryan Grist, who as coordinator of the economic rehabilitation project spends much of his time in Tskhinvali, said it was his sense that South Ossetian society was divided on Sanakoyev, with some people emphasizing that he had fought bravely in the war against the Georgians, while others claimed he had taken his recent pro-Georgian stance because of gambling debts. Vakhtang Dzhigkaev, an Ossetian expert with the OSCE's USAID-funded Economic Development Center, said that while he had initially thought Ossetians would never support a pro-Georgian alternative power structure,

people's attitudes were now changing because of the de facto authorities' mistakes.

¶4. (C) Most notable, Dzhigkaev said, was the dispute over the truckloads of mandarin oranges blocked from entering Russia (ref C). As Dzhigkaev explained, the incident began late last year when some truckers successfully transported mandarins, falsely labeled as being from Abkhazia but in reality from Ajara in government-controlled Georgia, into Russia via South Ossetia, thereby evading the Russian ban on Georgian agricultural goods. Learning of this, many more South Ossetian truckers bought large quantities of mandarins, and paid export "fees" to South Ossetian authorities, only to be stopped at the Russian checkpoint when Russia began enforcing the ban more strictly in November. Some truckers, who had gone heavily into debt to buy the oranges, remained with their trucks near the Roki tunnel in protest, but they received no sympathy from de facto president Kokoity, who criticized them even though his subordinates had taken money from them. It was in this atmosphere that Sanakoyev offered to buy all the mandarins at approximately half value. Six truckers accepted the offer, and all were promptly jailed by the authorities. (Comment: Everyone assumes Sanakoyev got the funds to make this offer from either the Georgian government or wealthy individuals allied with it. End Comment.) Dzhigkaev said Sanakoyev had taken the oranges he bought to a processing plant in Georgia.

¶5. (C) Reeve said that although OSCE was avoiding contact with Sanakoyev's administration, he understood that uniformed individuals had been seen in Georgian-controlled areas wearing new badges -- apparently police forces of the "alternative government." Reeve added that Georgia had always had a free hand in managing these areas.

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A Lull in Shootings

¶6. (C) OSCE military monitors expressed relief that there had not been a recurrence since February 3 of the nightly shootings that had recently erupted near Tskhinvali (ref A). Reeve and the observers noted that for the first time they had established which side had started one of the shootings: two JPKF peacekeepers (one Georgian, one Russian) confirmed that the South Ossetians had started an exchange of fire near Nikozi. Reeve suggested the revelation of this information was part of a pattern of increasing even-handedness by the JPKF, whose Russian leadership has long been criticized as pro-Ossetian. Reeve indicated that Georgian and international complaints about the JPKF's ineffectiveness may be having some effect on the commander, General Kulakhmetov. Even more important, he said, was having the new Georgian peacekeeping battalion commander on the ground, where he could exert some influence on the JPKF. The previous Georgian commander, who Reeve described as a close associate of former Defense Minister Okruashvili, had been barred from the area because the South Ossetians accused him of "war crimes" in a previous post in 2004.

The Georgian Radar

¶7. (C) OSCE military observers briefed the group on violations in the zone of conflict, noting that the majority occurred on the South Ossetian side. They gave some background on one of the more notable cases involving Georgia, explaining that the radar installation near Gori is not a violation in itself -- because it is not a weapon -- but the 5 or 6 armed individuals guarding it constitute a violation.

Comment

¶8. (C) The Russians' negative reaction to the South Ossetian PNGing of Abashidze suggests their support for Kokoity may not be unflinching. We are beginning to suspect there may be

some significance in Russia's silence regarding Sanakoyev, which contrasts sharply with Kokoity's strident reaction to him. Time will tell, but for the moment it appears Kokoity's position is weakening at home -- and perhaps in Moscow as well. End Comment.

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